

Mike Omer

Farborgen School for Gifted Children: The Dragon Daughter

Chapter 1

It started with a hiccup, which was very bad news, because lately whenever I hiccuped, smoke came out.

This has been happening for a while, but I've managed to hide it until now because smoking hiccups would probably draw attention to me. And if there's one thing you didn't want in the Loving Care Group Home, it was to attract attention. The Loving Care Group Home is where I lived right then, and here are two things I never saw, or felt, or even smelled there: Loving and Care.

When I had first noticed my smoking hiccups problem, I had taken extra care to hide it.

Whenever I felt a hiccup coming up I would bury my face in my shirt, and hold my breath for as much as I could until the hiccup went away. If that didn't help, I would drink an entire glass of water. And mostly, that did the trick.

When *this* particular hiccup happened, we were in the shared room watching TV. The shared room was a place in our group home where some kids never did any sharing. It was painted in a color that once upon a time was probably blue. But then came mold and dust and the color peeled and kids drew on the walls, and it changed to the saddest, sickest gray you can imagine. It had one couch on which a member of the staff sat, and three chairs on which the Bigs sat, and a lumpy rug on which the rest of the kids sat. The Bigs were also kids, but they were bigger than the rest, hence the name. They were also meaner than the rest. If you sat on one of the chairs, they punched and kicked you until you got off, and then they punched you some more, just so you remember not to sit on the chair again. They were those kids I mentioned, who never did any sharing in the shared room.

We were sitting on the rug, watching a reality show called *The Price of Love*. I would have preferred to watch *SpongeBob SquarePants*, but Mrs. Miller, the woman from the staff, and the Bigs, wanted to watch *The Price of Love*, so that's what we watched. Usually, I made sure I had my color pencils and sketchbook, and would use the time to draw, but I'd forgotten them in my bed that morning. So instead, I mostly stared out the window. Even though it was summer, the sky was drab and gray. I wondered if the sky was particularly gray around the group home, or if we had this in common with the rest of New York.

The hiccup took me by surprise, as hiccups often do. Before I could stop myself, I let it out, and a wisp of smoke came out of my mouth.

Thankfully, almost no one paid attention. They were too busy watching the screen, where this guy tried to make a woman love him by buying her a nice car. Only Rhonda, my friend, gawked

at me with surprise.

“Chloe!” she whispered “What’s that?”

I shook my head mutely and quickly buried my head in my shirt. Then I held my breath for as long as I could and—

Hic!

The second hiccup came, forcing my breath loose, and my shirt filled with smoke. A third hiccup followed the second, and more smoke came out, and now I knew the shirt wasn’t enough. The smoke was escaping through the fabric. A smoking shirt would attract just as much attention as a smoking hiccup. I tried to hold my breath again but the hiccups just kept—

Hic!

—coming.

Okay, this was a serious problem. I needed a glass of water, but drinks weren’t allowed in the shared room. Once, Rhonda told me that if someone scares you when you hiccup, then the hiccuping stops. But in the Loving Care Group Home, most kids were scared all the time, and they still hiccuped just like everyone else.

Hic!

That hiccup was the loudest and biggest of them all, and it let out a billow of smoke that surrounded me. By now, there was smoke all over the room, and most kids around me were gaping at me with wide eyes. Rhonda’s eyes were the widest. Anywhere else, the smoke alarm would have gone off, but there were no smoke alarms in the Loving Care Group Home, because the manager said it’s a waste of money. I guess he had to save the money for all that Loving and Caring.

I got up and went straight for the door. Usually, if you need to go to the bathroom, you have to ask permission. But Mrs. Miller’s eyes were glued to the screen, her mouth slightly ajar, and she didn’t even notice I was leaving.

But one of the Bigs did.

Her name was Kathy. She had long blond hair, and long sharp nails. Most of the kids in the group home were eleven, or twelve, just like me. But Kathy was fifteen - one of the oldest kids there. She was also the meanest, by far. And when I stood up, she looked straight at me, and her lip quirked in a tiny smile. People usually smile when they’re happy. And I guess maybe that’s true for Kathy, because she was always smiling when she hurt other kids, or called them terrible names. Anyway, no one wanted Kathy to smile at them. And that made me stride even faster. As soon as I was out of the room, I ran straight to the bathroom.

Once I shut the bathroom door behind me, I rushed to the sink. Another hiccup jerked my body, and a cloud of smoke filled the room. I turned on the water and drank straight from the tap, gulping more and more. I don’t know why water helps with hiccups. Maybe they don’t know how to swim. In any case, after drinking what felt like an entire swimming pool’s worth of water, the hiccuping stopped.

I washed my face and stood up, staring at myself in the chipped mirror above the grimy sink. I was eleven and three-quarters, but I was a bit short for my age, so I could only see the top of my face. My wavy ginger hair was a bit of a mess, as always. I let it grow long, mostly because I didn’t want to find out who cuts your hair in the Loving Care Group Home. By now, it reached below my shoulders. My freckled face was a bit red, probably from the effort of trying to keep the hiccuping at bay. Someone once told me if you hiccup too much, your eyes could pop out, but I was pretty sure he was just making fun of me. In any case, both my green eyes were right where they were supposed to be.

I did my best to straighten my hair with my fingers, then stepped out of the bathroom, and walked back toward the shared room.

Someone grabbed my collar from behind. Instinctively, I pulled away and heard a ripping sound as the shirt tore. The collar tightened around my throat, yanking me back. I struggled to free myself from the grasp. Finally, I managed to tug my shirt away, and whirled to face whoever had grabbed me.

It was Kathy, and her friend Beth. Beth was ridiculously large, towering over all the other kids in the group home, and even some of the staff. She was known to have a nose for candy, and whenever any kid had a snack, Beth would show up to snatch it away.

“Where are you going, Chloe?” Kathy asked.

“Yeah, Chloe, where are you going?” Beth repeated.

“Back from the bathroom,” I blurted.

“Oh really?” Kathy smiled at me. “And what did you do there?”

“Nothing,” I responded, the only correct answer to the question *What did you do*.

Kathy glanced at her friend. “Do you know what I think, Beth? I think Chloe has contraband, and she wants to hide it from us.”

I blinked. Contraband was anything kids in the Loving Care Group Home weren’t allowed to have, and that was a list of almost all the things in the world. Phones were contraband, and candy, and scissors, and fizzy drinks, and stickers, and makeup, and chewing gum, and cash, and...

If I’d list all the things that were contraband, it would take all day, and I’d probably forget half of it anyway.

“I don’t have contraband,” I said. It was true, I had nothing on me.

“I saw you in the shared room,” Kathy said. “You were smoking. You have cigarettes.”

Oh, great. She’d seen the smoke that came out when I was hiccuping, and assumed I was smoking *cigarettes*.

I let out a laugh. “Why would I smoke cigarettes? Only idiots smoke cigarettes. They give you cancer and make your breath smell like bad milk.”

Kathy’s smile vanished. It occurred to me that I’ve seen her smoke cigarettes in the facility’s grounds a few times. Maybe calling her an idiot wasn’t my best decision that day. Beth cracked her knuckles – not a very good sign either.

“Give me the cigarettes, Chloe.” Kathy snarled.

“I don’t have any cigarettes.” I took a step back.

“She says she doesn’t have any, Beth.” Kathy imitated my voice.

Beth laughed. She had a booming laugh that echoed in the room, making everything vibrate, like a tiny earthquake.

“Maybe we should take her necklace instead,” Kathy whispered maliciously.

My hand went to my pendant. It used to belong to my mother. She died when I was five, and it was the only thing I had from her. Usually, I tucked the pendant into my shirt, and no one saw it. But when they grabbed my collar, the pendant popped out, and was now easily visible.

“Don’t you dare,” I said, gritting my teeth.

“You know what? I think we’ll take both your cigarettes, *and* your cheap necklace. Just for talking back.” Kathy glanced at Beth. “Get her stuff.”

Beth took a step forward.

Maybe they expected me to run. Or scream. Or cry. I didn’t do any of those things.

I lunged straight at Beth. Like I said, Beth was huge, easily twice my size. Which was just fine

with me, because when I rammed into her, my head sank straight into her stomach. It felt weird, as if my head sank into an unpleasant, blubbery pillow.

“Oooooooooof.” Beth groaned.

She toppled back, landing on her bottom, and I swear, the entire hallway shuddered.

I didn’t wait to see what happened next. I turned around and *bolted*.

Sometimes, when one of the staff felt like we weren’t doing enough exercise, they would take us out to the group home’s grounds, and make us race. And you know what? I loved running. When I’d run, sometimes I’d feel like my feet were flying above ground. It almost seemed like I would never need to stop, that I would run, and run, and circle the world.

Rhonda had pointed out to me it was impossible to circle the world running. I would just drown when I reached the ocean. But that’s how it felt like. And the real point was I could run faster and longer than anyone in the group home.

So now I was getting further away from Beth and Kathy, and I knew they would never catch me. I could find somewhere to hide and wait until they forgot about me. I got to the empty cafeteria, and ran past one of the smaller boys who was by himself, looking at me with his mouth open. I reached the end of the cafeteria, and glanced back. Beth and Kathy were on the far end of the food court. Kathy glared straight at me, her eyes narrow with fury.

But Beth’s eyes were locked on the little boy.

He held a chocolate candy bar. Maybe he got it from a visitor just before. He clutched it in his hand as if it was a precious treasure, which in the Loving Care Group Home, it was. They *never* gave us chocolate. Even in Easter, instead of chocolate bunnies, they gave us potato bunnies, which they said were cheaper, and probably healthier.

Beth’s eyes locked onto the chocolate. Her nose quivered as she smelled it. I knew what would happen next. She would walk over, and hit the boy, and take his chocolate.

The smart thing would be to run away. I didn’t know the boy very well, and it was only chocolate. Maybe with chocolate in their belly, Beth and Kathy would be satisfied, and forget about me.

But the boy was so tiny, he was probably six, or seven. He looked so frightened. And he clutched that chocolate like it was the most important thing in the world.

I couldn’t let them do that. I just couldn’t.

“Hey Beth and Kathy!” I called out.

Okay, before I tell you the next bit, there’s something I need to say. There are what grownups call “bad words” or “curse words.” I didn’t use those often, and almost never cursed someone to their face. Kids say “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” but that’s not true. Words can hurt a lot. I’ve been called a lot of bad names, and it almost always hurts. It hurt in my throat, and my chest, and my stomach. So I don’t curse others.

Unless it’s an emergency.

And this was definitely an emergency. So I was about to use curse words. And I bet you know some good curse words too, but in the group home, we learned *a lot* of those. And I don’t want anyone to learn new curse words from me.

So I’m going to tell the next bit of my story, but I’ll replace the curse words I used with vegetable names. And you can switch those vegetables in your mind for all the great curse words you know.

“Hey Beth and Kathy!” I called out. “You carrots! You two turnips! I’m over here, brussels sprouts! Hey Beth, your face looks like a radish, and your nose looks like a broccoli!”

They glowered at me, both of them clearly furious. Then I used the worst word I knew. “You’ll

never catch me, you *cauliflowers*.”

Well *that* did it. They forgot about the boy and his chocolate. Beth roared and went after me, Kathy following close behind. They would never forget about me now. They would tear the facility brick from brick until they found me, and beat me up.

I ran again.

My plan was to reach the rear exit, and get out through it to the facility grounds. From there, I could run pretty far away. Maybe even just keep running, never turn back. The more I thought about it, the better it sounded in my head. I would miss Rhonda, but other than her, there was nothing in the Loving Care Group Home I ever wanted to see again. I was getting all cheered up by that notion, as I ran with two murderous girls chasing me.

But the rear exit was shut, and locked, and my nice escape fantasy died right there.

I kept on going, but that hallway was a dead end. Which was a good definition right then, because I was about to end up dead too. I bolted into a storage room, and slammed the door behind me. The room had broken beds and chairs and desks, and I pushed them against the door, to block it from opening.

The doorknob turned. The door shuddered against the pile of furniture.

“We’re gonna kill you, Chloe!” Kathy screamed through the door.

There was nowhere to go. And all the tables and chairs I piled against the door weren’t enough.

The door shifted with a loud scrape.

My heart was hammering really hard. There were tears in my eyes. And then I did the weirdest thing ever. It was also sort of gross.

I belched.

We had a boy in our group home who could burp the entire ABC, which was pretty disgusting, but also hilarious. And I was always impressed by how he could go on for so long.

But my belch right then would have put him to shame. It went on for what seemed like forever, just an endless rumbling and gurgling. Yes, it was exactly as gross as it sounds.

And as I belched, smoke came out of my mouth in thick clouds, that slowly filled the room.

The door finally opened, the furniture I piled tumbling everywhere, but by now, the entire room was full of thick smoke. I couldn’t see anything. Beth and Kathy shouted and coughed, and I could hear them as they stumbled around, searching for me. I remained quiet, and as I heard them getting further from the door, I quickly ran to it, and sneaked out.

Glancing back, I saw smoke billowing out of the open door. I could still hear Beth and Kathy coughing and shouting within. I was so busy glancing over my shoulder, that I ran straight into Mrs. Miller.

“What the hell is going on?” she shouted, staring at the open door, and the clouds of smoke.

I had no answer. I would have kept running, except she grabbed my wrist.

And then Kathy stumbled out of the room, her entire face sooty, her clothes dirty, her hair a mess. Beth emerged after her, hawking and coughing, looking just as bad.

Mrs. Miller shouted at them, trying to understand what was going on. And between coughs, they blamed me, said I created the smoke somehow, that it came from me.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mrs. Miller said. “Smoke doesn’t come from girls.”

“Yeah, you’re not making any sense,” I said. “How exactly do you think I did all that?”

And just then, another hiccup came out. And a cloud of smoke escaped my lips.

Chapter 2

When kids in the Loving Care Group Home didn't feel well, or had a toothache, or a cough, they got sent to the nurse.

Hang on, this didn't come out exactly right.

They got sent to The Nurse.

No one wanted to get sent to The Nurse. Kathy and Beth typically weren't afraid of anything, but even they got pale when they needed to go to The Nurse.

I've been in the Loving Care Group Home for just over two years, and I've somehow managed to avoid going to The Nurse in all that time. I had the flu twice, and in both times, I just hid until I got better, while Rhonda sneaked me cups of lukewarm tea. I had a bad history with doctors in general, which I will talk about later, and I really didn't want to meet the infamous nurse.

The nurse's actual name was Ms. Hecate Graves. She was the tallest staff member in the facility, and bony thin. Her skin was as white as paper. The legend told that she became a nurse because it was the only job in which she could legally jab kids with sharp objects. The door to her office was always shut, and there was a weird scraping from within. That's because she had only one needle for her syringes, and that was the sound of her sharpening it. She said it's a waste of money to buy any more - she'd gotten that needle twenty-seven years ago, and it still worked just fine.

It turned out that if a kid hiccuped and smoke came out, she was also sent to The Nurse.

Which was how I found myself in her office.

Hecate's office had shelves full of jars and bandages, and other things you'd expect to see at a nurse's office. But there were also other utilities, like a large saw, and a blowtorch, and iron pliers, and objects I didn't even know the names of. I couldn't imagine what she did with any of those instruments, except for the pliers. Everyone knew what she did with the pliers. I don't want to talk about it. Seriously.

The chair I sat in was large and wooden. Strangely, it had straps on both armrests, that dangled loosely. I wasn't sure what they were for, and hoped I wouldn't find out.

"Now then," Hecate said, peering at me from above. She had a voice that reminded me of fingernails scraping against a blackboard. "Mrs. Miller said you hiccup, and smoke comes out."

I wanted to deny that, but just then I actually *did* hiccup, and smoke came out. So much for the theory that fear cured hiccups. I was absolutely terrified, and it didn't help at all.

"That's very strange." She frowned. "I've never heard of that happening before."

"It's probably just a virus," I said. "It'll go away by itself."

"Hm." She sniffed. She didn't seem impressed with my medical opinion. "Let's take your temperature."

"I really feel better." I hurriedly got up from the chair. "I don't want to take any more of your time."

"Sit down," she snapped at me.

I sat back down. I really didn't want her to take my temperature. I've had that done to me before,

and it never went well.

She took an electric thermometer from her desk and aimed it at my forehead. It beeped. Then it shrieked. And then it sort of made a sad blip. She shook it and frowned at the display.

“Hm. Broken.”

She went over to the cupboard, and retrieved a new one, turning it on. She aimed it at my forehead again.

Beep. Shriek. Sad blip.

“What’s going on here?” she muttered, shaking the thermometer.

I could have told her that this always happened. Like I said, I had a bad history with doctors. They never managed to take my temperature. When they checked my ears, they always said my ear canal didn’t make sense. If they told me to say “ah” and put a tongue depressor in my mouth, I always bit it and snapped it in half. Doctors and I didn’t get along.

“The problem is those modern pieces of junk,” Hecate finally announced. “Let’s try an old fashioned thermometer.”

She rummaged in one of her cupboards, and took out a glass thermometer. She handed it to me.

“Put that under your tongue.”

I wasn’t thrilled by the idea, but she gave me one of her looks, and I quickly did as I was told.

“Now we wait,” she said. “It should take about three minutes to—”

The thermometer exploded. Shards of glass scattered everywhere. I quickly dropped the remaining broken piece from my mouth.

“Well, I never!” she said, staring at me in shock.

I hiccuped again, filling the air with more smoke.

Shaking her head, Hecate went over to a shelf of medical books, and retrieved one. She opened it, and flipped pages with impatience.

“Smoking hiccups...” she muttered. “Smoking hiccups. It’s obviously not the flu. Or strep throat. Something more rare? Maybe leprosy?”

“I don’t have leprosy!”

“Quiet, girl, let me concentrate. No... I suppose it’s not leprosy. Or rabies, for that matter. Hm. There’s something called walking corpse syndrome...”

“I’m really fine.”

“I asked that you remain quiet!” She slammed the book and retrieved another one. “The black plague... No. Huh, the green fever... Those books are useless. Let’s see if the Internet has answers for us.”

“The Internet?” I asked in disbelief. “You’re diagnosing me with the Internet?”

“Nothing wrong with the Internet,” Hecate snapped as she typed with her bony fingers on her keyboard. “It’s the largest knowledge-base in the world. I’ve found some useful treatments on the Internet. For example, did you know that raw garlic can cure baldness?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not true.”

“The Internet says so. Are you going to argue with the Internet?” she jutted her jaw. “Smoking hiccups... How do you spell hiccup?”

Just then I noticed something. There was a folder on her desk. A beige folder with my name labeled on it - *Chloe Maddox*.

It was my file. The one the group home kept of me. All the kids here had one. It contained all of our medical history, but also our general background in the Loving Care Group Home... and before.

I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

Altogether, I had five years with my mother. I obviously didn't remember most of them. No one remembers being a baby. That's probably fine, for most kids. They still have many years of memories with their parents. But for someone like me, whose parents died when I was very young, forgetting all those baby years is a terrible waste. Years of being held, and hugged, and kissed, and loved, gone.

I remembered my mother just a little bit, and those memories were blurry. I remembered long ginger hair, just like mine. I remembered the sound of her humming. I remembered a sweet scent, that I've never smelled since.

I remembered when she told me that we have to leave our home, that we were going on a long trip. I could see that she was scared, but I didn't know why. She put me in the car in the middle of the night, and started driving. I fell asleep.

And then she woke me up. She escorted me through a glass door, and introduced me to a woman who smelled like cheese. She told me that this woman would take care of me for a while. That she had to leave, but she'd come back in a few days. I cried. She hugged me, and gave me her pendant. She told me she loved me. And she left.

She never came back.

The woman was the manager of a group home - that one was called The Happy Clown Group Home. All the kids were little, like me. A few weeks after I got there, the manager took me to her office. She told me that there had been an accident, and that my mother was gone. I didn't understand what she meant. She gave me a lollipop, and said that it was okay to cry. But I didn't cry. I was still sure that my mom would come back for me. She promised she would.

But like I said, she didn't.

Anyway, I was in that group home for three years. Then, they moved me to another group home that was called the Shiny Star Group Home. That one wasn't as good as the Happy Clown. But after two years there, they moved me to Loving Care Group Home, and that one was the absolute worst.

I never managed to get an answer to any of my questions - what happened to my mother? Why did she put me in the group home in the first place? Who was my dad? All those questions made the grownups uncomfortable, or angry, and after a while, I stopped asking.

Now here was a folder with my name on it, and I could see a thick bundle of papers inside. I had to know what was in it. But first I had to get rid of nurse Hecate Graves.

"If I don't know what's wrong with you, I won't be able to treat you," she said, swiveling her chair to scrutinize me. She was tapping her thin lips with one long finger, examining me as if I was a peculiar insect she'd found in her room.

"Maybe I don't need treatment," I suggested, doing my best not to look at the folder on the table. She sighed. "I guess I could try various treatments and see what works. We could try... electric shock therapy. That's always a good one to start with. Maybe acupuncture, I'd need some extra large needles for that. And I suppose we could try a lobotomy, that solves all kinds of problems." With every treatment she suggested, she seemed happier. When she said *lobotomy* she practically clapped her hands with glee.

I had to see what's in that folder, but I also had to *make sure* that I didn't go through any of those terrifying treatments.

"Those all sound really expensive," I said.

Hecate took a sharp breath.

You know those really bad words I mentioned earlier? Well, there's one word that all the staff in the Loving Care Group Home treated as the worst word in the world - The E word. *Expensive*.

The Loving Care Group Home got a certain amount of money for each kid in the facility. That money was paid to take care of us. But if they spent *less* money on us, they could use it for other things, like a nice television for Mrs. Miller, or brand new pliers for the nurse, or a fancy car for the manager. So the important thing was to avoid anything *expensive*.

“I really appreciate everything you want to do for me,” I said. “But maybe you should check with the manager, just in case.”

Hecate pursed her lips. “I suppose you’re right. I’m too nice for my own good. I’ll go get the manager’s approval. Your health is important to us, after all.”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded emphatically.

“Don’t. Touch. Anything.” With each word she wagged her bony finger at me.

Then she stepped out of the office. I heard the lock click. She locked me inside.

I lunged at the folder greedily, and opened it. The first few pages were forms, filled up in a careful hand. I skimmed them, and gathered that these were the forms the manager filled to get the monthly payment for me. I flipped through the pages. Found other, yellowing forms from the other group homes I’ve been in. And finally, a page that was titled *Chloe Maddox - case #305498*.

There were lines and lines on the page, all about me.

And every single one of them was blacked out with a black marker.

Someone had gone through my files and erased my history.

I flipped the page, and saw another page, with more blacked out lines. Flipping another page I found a third. And a fourth. And a fifth.

There were so many pages, all about me, and all blacked out.

For some reason, someone wrote *a lot* of things about me. And then, for another mysterious reason, someone saw the need to black it all out.

Twelve pages. All blacked out. I nearly cried with frustration. But then I realized that two of the last pages were stuck together. I pried them apart.

Whoever had blacked everything out probably didn’t notice that these two pages were stuck. So they never blacked out the last one. It had just a few lines written in circular, delicate handwriting.

...Need to check with Chloe Maddox’s close relative. They might decide to adopt her after all. The Happy Clown Group Home is not equipped for a girl like Chloe. We only take care of Human children, and I am not sure that we are even legally allowed to take care of something else. I will check with our attorney. In any case, for now, she will stay at our group home, at least for a few more days until the matter is clarified.

And that was that.

I stared at that page, reading and rereading those lines, trying to make sense of them. They made it sound like I wasn’t... human. But of course I was. I mean, what other option was there? This had to be some sort of strange spelling mistake, or maybe a weird phrase I wasn’t familiar with. Other than that, it sounded like I had a relative. I had family. Somewhere. Someone who was related to me, who could adopt me.

Something splattered on the page. A drop of water. No, it was a tear. I was crying.

I flipped the page, but it was the last one. I nearly shut the folder, but then I noticed there was a tiny flap at the back, like a small pocket. I peered inside and saw something. A photo. I took it out, and scrutinized it.

It was a woman, and a little girl. Both were smiling at the camera. Both had ginger hair. The woman was my mother, Ellie Maddox. And I guessed the little girl was me. The lock clicked behind me. Hurriedly I slid the photograph into my pocket, and shut the folder, just as the door opened. When Hecate stepped into the room, I was sitting in my chair, twiddling my thumbs, staring innocently at the ceiling.

“Well.” She sniffed with displeasure. “I’m sorry to say that we have no budget for a lobotomy, or for acupuncture, or even for electric shock therapy. It’s all very disappointing. And I still don’t know what’s wrong with you. I suppose we’ll have to do blood tests. Maybe check your bone marrow. I won’t rest until I know what’s causing these smoking hiccups.”

“I think I know,” I said.

She folded her arms. “Really?”

“I’m sorry, I should have told you earlier. I um... I swallowed some cigarettes.” I made that up on the spot, inspired by what Kathy had assumed earlier.

“You *what*?”

“I found a box of cigarettes. And I thought they were a sort of candy. So I ate them.” I met her eyes as I said this, doing my best to look sorry.

“You... ate... cigarettes?”

“Six of them.” I frowned. “They weren’t any good.”

“Of course not, you stupid girl! You’re not supposed to eat cigarettes.” She shook her head in amazement. “Well, I suppose that can explain it. Cigarettes make smoke. Some chemical in your stomach must have lit them inside you, and the smoke came out.”

“That makes sense.” I agreed enthusiastically. “But the good news is, the hiccups are gone, and we now know what happened, so there’s no need to do anything. I promise I will never eat cigarettes again.” I got up from the chair.

“Not so fast!”

I paused, my heart beating fast. Of course she saw through my lie. It was so ridiculous.

“Eating cigarettes can cause serious health problems. We’ll need to make sure you don’t get ill.” She opened a drawer in her desk and took out her one, long, needle. She grinned at me, her teeth bared like a crazed wolf’s. “A large shot of vitamins should do the trick.”

Chapter 3

I had a hard time sleeping that night. Partly, this was because my right arm ached after the shot the nurse gave me. I like sleeping on my right side, but the pain made it impossible, so I had to lie down on my left side, which felt all wrong.

But mostly, I just couldn't make my brain to turn off.

I kept thinking about those few sentences I read in my file. The part about me not being *human* was just ridiculous. The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that I just didn't read it right. It probably said that I wasn't *from Maine*, which made sense, because I had been born in New York.

But the part about my relative kept circling in my mind endlessly. For the past six and a half years, I'd gotten used to the idea that I was all alone, my family gone. I always had friends, and I kept telling myself that it would have to be enough. But now that I knew that I had a relative, I desperately wanted to meet them. Did they know they had a close family member, living in a group home? Maybe they didn't know that I had been moved. Maybe they'd gone looking for me in the Happy Clown Group Home, only by that time I'd been transferred to a different facility.

I desperately wanted to fall asleep, but whenever my mind drifted away, I'd think of a new way I could look for them. I could search online. Or I could break into the manager's office and look for contact details. Or I could hire a private detective - I would have to make some money first, of course. Maybe I could do street shows, hiccuping and blowing smoke, and use my earnings to pay the private detective. Maybe I could go on a talent show on TV with my smoking hiccups trick, and my relatives would be so impressed that *they* would start looking for *me*.

My thoughts got more and more silly as the night progressed.

And every so often I would slide my hand to my pocket, making sure the photograph was still there. In the darkness, I couldn't really see it, but just the feeling of the photograph's surface was enough to make me feel a bit closer to my mom.

And then, finally, the night ended, and I had to get up. I was so tired after being awake all night, that I kept nodding off. I fell asleep with my toothbrush in my mouth and toothpaste foam dribbled down my chin. Then I nodded off during breakfast, my spoon dropping from my fingers to the floor. Rhonda did her best to urge me along from one place to the other, but all I wanted was to get back to bed.

Sometimes, when I was really tired, it felt like the world was against me. Noises were screechier, and smells were stinkier, and lights were blinding. This was one of those days.

My clothes itched, and everything I ate tasted like sawdust mixed with boogers.

Then, around noon, I was leaning against the window by the cafeteria, staring at the gloomy gray day outside. A black car showed up, driving down the street. A few ravens flew by. The car slowed down, as if the driver was searching for a specific house.

And the ravens fluttered their wings, flying in circles above the car.

At first, I didn't pay attention. A black car and some birds, who cared? I was tired, and my arm ached. But the car turned around driving down the street again, and the ravens followed it whenever it went.

Finally, the vehicle parked in front of the facility. The ravens all landed on its roof. A dark haired woman, her white cheeks flushed by the cold, stepped outside. She was dressed in a long black coat, and she pulled it tighter around her. She glanced around, turning her head in swift, sharp movements. Who was she? Sometimes, we'd get a visit from social services. Perhaps she was a social worker.

Then, one of the ravens flapped its wings, taking off from the car. It glided over to the woman. I almost let out a shout of warning, it looked like the raven was about to attack her! But instead, it landed on the woman's shoulder.

I blinked, rubbing my eyes. The woman didn't seem surprised. She tipped her head slightly toward the raven on her shoulder, and it opened its beak and cawed in her ear several times. I was about to call Rhonda over, but then the raven took off. The woman walked briskly toward the facility, her long coat fluttering behind her. For just one second, when the light hit her in a certain angle, the coat didn't seem like a coat at all. It looked like feathers. Like black wings.

Then she passed below the window, disappearing from my sight.

Perhaps I only imagined it. I was so tired, I kept seeing weird shapes and dots wherever I looked. I put it out of my mind.

Lunch in the Loving Care Group Home was a very sad affair. Mr. Bland, our cook, wasn't merely a bad cook. I suppose that even a bad cook could accidentally create food with taste. But Mr. Bland somehow managed to remove the taste and texture out of everything he made. That day, we had soft peas that tasted like paste, soft pasta that tasted like paste, and soft meatloaf that tasted like paste. Often, Rhonda and I would play the tasting game - one of us would close her eyes and scoop food into her mouth. Then she had to guess what it was. I never managed to get it right.

Like I mentioned, that day, everything tasted even worse, so the paste taste had a distinct bitterness to it. I toyed with my food and fantasized about my bed. The harsh neon light from above was giving me a headache, and the sound of the kids around me talking, and of spoons scraping against bowls set my teeth on edge.

And then the manager stepped into the cafeteria.

The manager rarely showed up. He remained cooped up in his office, and kept busy shuffling papers. He had a square head, ruddy cheeks, and a bulging stomach. He usually had a self-satisfied smile. He had a wig that was always slightly askew, and when he talked, he would scratch his head, and the wig would slide around his head, nearly falling off. But no one ever laughed when he did that. No one wanted to make the manager angry. Not the kids, not even the staff.

As he stepped into the cafeteria, everyone stopped eating, and looked up at him. He beamed at us, wearing his self-satisfied smile.

"I hope you're all enjoying your meal," he said.

Enjoying this meal was just as likely as having a blast during a math test, or partying at the dentist's. No one said anything. I stared down at my tray where the peas were mixing with the pasta, creating a blob of inedible mush. The manager glanced around the large room and clapped his hands in satisfaction, as if we'd all said that the food was the best we ever tasted.

"Thanks to my superior management," he said. "We were selected by the Nithercott Foundation, to participate in a very unique opportunity."

A low buzz of whispers circled the cafeteria. I tried to remember where I had heard the name Nithercott before. It sounded vaguely familiar.

"The Nithercott Foundation has a scholarship for gifted children," the manager continued.

"And because I'm a very important figure in the field of education, they approached me.

They asked to test you all, and see if any of you are good enough to meet their standards."

His wide smile faltered, and he examined us all skeptically. It was clear that he didn't think it

likely.

“Anyway.” He cleared his throat. “As much as you all love listening to me talk, it is best if I let their representative explain. This is Mrs... uh...”

The dark-haired woman with the long black coat entered the hall and stood by the manager.

“Ms. Ingram,” she said. “Vera Ingram. Thank you, Hank.”

The whispering in the cafeteria intensified. No one ever called the manager anything else than “the manager.” I had been half sure that it was his actual name, first name “the,” last name “manager.” But apparently, he was called Hank.

“As Hank explained,” Ms. Ingram said. “The Nithercott foundation is interested in educating children. We try to locate gifted children throughout the country, and invite them to our special school. I will be testing any of you who might be interested in this opportunity.”

“They’re all interested,” the manager hurriedly said.

Ms. Ingram glanced at the manager and raised an eyebrow. The manager nervously scratched his head, pulling his wig so far back that the top half of his bald head was entirely exposed.

“Right then,” Ms. Ingram finally said. “I’ll be conducting the interviews in Hank’s office.

Please send the kids to me in an orderly manner. And don’t skip anyone.” The last words were aimed at the manager, sounding almost like a threat.

For the rest of the day, we waited. The staff let us watch TV, and didn’t even pretend to look after us. It was clear that Vera Ingram, whoever she was, made them very nervous. Every ten or twenty minutes, Mrs. Miller would show up and call one of us by name. First, Kathy and the rest of the Bigs were called. Then, one by one, the rest of us were summoned. Rhonda went before me. When she returned, I asked her how did it go.

She shrugged. “She asked me some questions. But they weren’t like questions that checked if I was smart or anything. She just asked about my family, and how I ended up here and stuff.” She paused thoughtfully. “She was nice,” she added.

“Chloe Maddox,” Mrs. Miller called.

I got up, heart in my throat, and followed Mrs. Miller down the hall and up the stairs, to the manager’s office in the second floor. When we reached it, she knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Ms. Ingram’s voice called from inside.

Mrs. Miller opened the door and ushered me in. She shut the door behind me.

I looked around me nervously. I was never in this room. It had a large wooden desk, and two chairs. The walls were decorated by dozens of photos of the manager. In all of them, he was wearing the same satisfied smirk of his. The entire room smelled like boiled cabbage.

Ms. Ingram sat on one of the chairs, still wearing her coat, even though it was quite warm in there. “Come in, Chloe. Sit down.”

“Um... where’s the manager?” I asked hesitantly.

“Hank was gracious enough to leave the room for me,” Ms. Ingram said. Her black hair was long and smooth, shining in the dim light that came through the window. She gazed at me with eyes as blue as the sky on a bright spring day. Her pale face seemed to radiate a warmth I wasn’t used to seeing here. “Please. Sit down.”

I sat, folding my hands in my lap.

“So,” she said. “How long have you been in the group home, Chloe?”

“Um... about two years,” I muttered, staring down. It was hard to meet her gaze. She was scrutinizing me intently.

Most grownups didn’t really pay attention to me, not even when they talked to me directly. They would treat me as a task, or a problem. They would stare at me distractedly, like one would look at furniture, or a traffic sign. But Ingram’s eyes bore into me, really *seeing* me.

“What happened there?” she asked, pointing.

It took me a moment to understand what she was talking about. In contrast to her coat, I wore one of my short-sleeved shirts. There was an enormous ugly bruise where the nurse had given

me the vitamin shot.

“Um... I got a vitamin shot yesterday. Miss.”

“Please.” She waved her hand. “Call me Vera. Do you regularly get vitamin shots?”

“No, but I had to see the nurse yesterday. So she gave me this shot.”

“Did she.” It didn’t sound like a question. Her voice was flat. Almost angry. “Why did you see the nurse?”

“It was just a small problem. Hiccups.”

“Usually hiccups don’t require medical intervention,” she said. “Not unless they’re very unusual. If, for example, smoke came out every time you hiccuped, now *that* might be reason to see a doctor.”

I gawked at her, startled. “Did she tell you about it?”

She grinned, eyes twinkling in amusement. “No, I already knew. So tell me, Chloe, how did you end up in the Loving Care Group Home?”

“Um... I was transferred from another group home.”

“And before that?” she asked softly.

“Before that was another group home.” I thought of the photo in my pocket. “My mother put me there.”

She nodded slowly. “Where is she now?”

I swallowed. “She’s gone.”

“I’m sorry.” She eyed me somberly. “And your father?”

“I... I never met him.”

She frowned. For a few seconds, she said nothing. Her expression was deeply sad. Was she sad that I had no parents? Maybe, but this place was full of kids with sad stories. Surely she’d heard similar stories from all the kids that came before me.

“I want you to do something for me,” she finally said.

“What?”

She slid her hand into her pocket and retrieved something beautiful. It was a white crystal, with smooth surfaces, and numerous points and edges. The more I stared at it, the more intricate and strange it seemed.

“I want you to hold this,” she said.

For a second, I didn’t dare. It looked expensive, and unique. I was afraid I’d accidentally drop it. But she kept holding it out, and finally I leaned forward and took it from her.

I expected it to be cold, but it was warm. And as soon as I took it from her hand, its color changed. I let out a surprised gasp as I watched it, color swimming within like ink in a bottle. It slowly turned a bright pink.

“Ah,” she said, her voice a whisper. “I assumed as much. Thank you, Chloe Maddox. Can I have it back?”

I gave her the crystal, which turned white as soon as she took it.

“What *is* that?” I blurted.

She studied me for a few long seconds. “I suppose I owe you an answer to that,” she finally said. “That, Chloe, is a dragon locator.”